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Webster Says Gorbachev's Hold on Power 'Increasingly Uncertain'

By RUTH SINAI

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - Retiring CIA Director William Webster said Thursday that Mikhail Gorbachev's hold on power "is increasingly uncertain" as he struggles to tether his secessionist republics and prevent the Soviet Union's economic ruin.

Webster also said the United States was carefully monitoring increasing Kremlin nervousness over possibly losing control of nuclear weapons deployed around the country.

Webster, 67, spoke with reporters at a breakfast meeting to mark the close of his four-year tenure as Director of Central Intelligence.

His frank assessment, an unusual departure in an administration reluctant to openly discuss Gorbachev's prospects, came as President Bush weighed the Soviet leader's proposal to finance internal economic reform with massive Western aid.

Bush was expected to meet Friday with three Soviet economists who have been in Washington this week laying out their latest reform plans for U.S. and international finance officials.

On other issues, Webster said:

-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is "very much in charge" and the international blockade of his oil exports is the only leverage the United States has to force him from power.

- "Something good could come of" recent signs that Iran is seeking accommodation with the West and that some American hostages held by Iranian-sponsored radicals in Lebanon might be freed.

-The United States is disappointed countries that once strongly supported efforts to stop drug production appear to have moved away from their commitment. He cited Colombia in particular.

After years of halting attempts at shoring up the Soviet economy, Gorbachev is seeking a massive infusion of Western aid to fend off collapse while he institutes broad structural reform - including the sale of state-owned enterprises to private buyers, liberalization of prices and unspecified monetary reforms.

But Webster indicated he wasn't optimistic about the reforms.

Moscow still doesn't appear to have a "game plan," he said, adding that Gorbachev isn't addressing the drastic problems plaguing the country's transportation and telecommunications systems - "the things that make our system work."

In recent weeks, Gorbachev has jettisoned his conservative and hardline allies in favor of those preaching bold, market-oriented

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moves. But, Webster said, "the question is - is it too late for Gorbachev?"

Gorbachev's future is increasingly uncertain," he said.

After all, Webster said reaching for a Biblical allusion, "Moses never saw the promised land."

He may lose the initiative to the Yeltsins and others at the republic level," Webster said, referring to Russian Republic President Boris Yeltsin and leaders of the other Soviet republics seeking greater autonomy.

Yeltsin, the avant-garde populist who recently abandoned his confrontational relationship with Gorbachev in favor of a conciliatory tone, views Gorbachev "as the best of the central alternatives," Webster said, adding that he's also pursuing his agenda at the local level.

Gorbachev will try to make secession economically costly for the republics, "but I don't think it'll stop the republics on their way to the exit door," Webster said.

The agency began to shift its focus in the belief that the threat of a Soviet ground attack on the West continues to decline, he said. The Soviets are "essentially in a defensive mode," Webster said, as they slash defense spending and bring troops back from Eastern Europe.

But another threat may be looming - that of Moscow losing control of its nuclear arsenal.

"Could their assets fall into unfriendly hands as a result of internal struggles?" Webster asked. "We see them paying more attention to this in ways that would suggest they're not as confident" as they were, he said.

"This is an area we're going to have to watch very carefully," Webster said.

Webster, who served nine years as director of the FBI before coming to the CIA in 1987, announced earlier this month he was retiring from government service to practice law.

Bush has appointed his deputy national security adviser, Robert Gates, to succeed Webster if Congress approves. Webster will remain in office until his successor is approved.